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# Talk it Up with Videoconferencing

By Kevin Savetz
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Sometimes words are not enough. The telephone is a staple of modern communications, and e-mail changed the way business is conducted like nothing that came before it. But as anyone who has sat through a meeting can tell you, sometimes business communication involves charts, frenzied scribbling on a whiteboard, and dramatic waving of arms — none of which has much of an effect on the phone or in e-mail.

Internet videoconferencing is a powerful way to communicate with your employees, clients, and customers. It can give your conversations the impact of being in the same room, when in fact the people you're talking to can be across the country or across town. Videoconferencing allows you to see the people you're talking with and, depending on the software you're using, you may be able to share charts, documents, and notes just as effectively as in person.

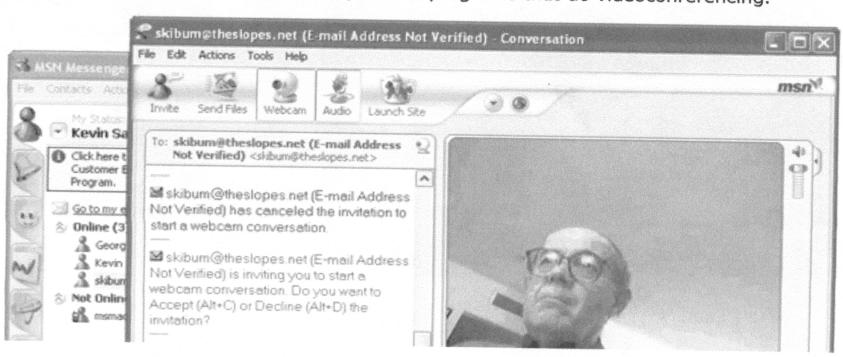
Online videoconferencing can range from free to moderately expensive, depending on the features you need and the number of people in your conference. Even if you need to invest in new video hardware and software, a videoconference will certainly be cheaper than an airline ticket for a face-to-face meeting. And compared to the hassle of airport security, it will be less frustrating, too.

In order to take part in a videoconference, each participant will need a video camera and microphone attached to their computer. The hardware isn't expensive: your local computer shop or favorite online computer store has many choices in Web cams that typically cost $20 to $100. These cameras connect to your computer's universal serial bus (USB) port. Although video quality varies from model to model, you'll generally find that they're all good enough for videoconferencing. Your camera may or may not include a microphone. If it doesn't, you'll need an external mic (plugged into your PC's audio input port or USB port.) Even if it does, consider using a headset microphone for your conferences: they'll provide clearer sound with less chance for audio feedback.

You'll also need videoconferencing software: there are many programs to choose from. All participants should agree on one program. Although a few videoconference applications can work with other software, things will generally go more smoothly if everyone uses one program.

## Instant Messaging Software

Although you might think of them strictly as tools for quick text exchanges, some instant messaging clients can be the gateway to a fast and hassle-free videoconference. MSN Messenger and Yahoo Messenger are both free, easy-to-use programs that do videoconferencing.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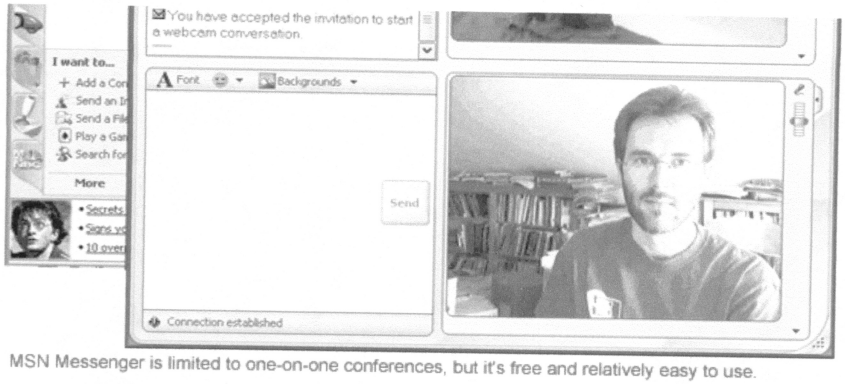


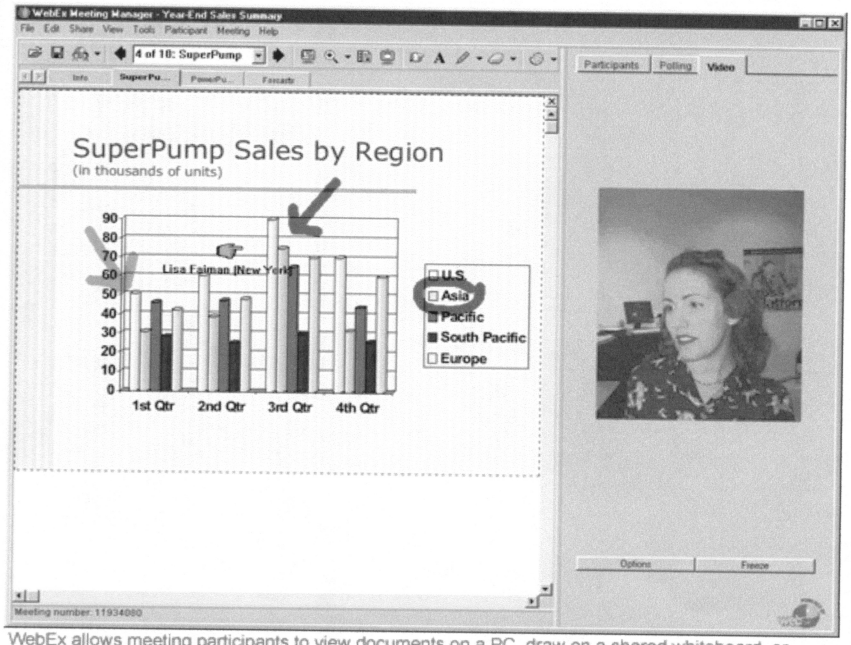
MSN Messenger is limited to one-on-one conferences, but it's free and relatively easy to use.

Yahoo Messenger supports one-on-one and group videoconferences, while MSN Messenger is limited to one-on-one conferences. Both programs allow you to exchange files with others, but neither includes a "shared whiteboard" function — so others can't see your charts and drawings in real-time.

For MacOS X users, the de facto standard is Apple's iChat AV and iSight, a camera that connects to the Mac's FireWire port.

**Videoconferencing Services**
Instant messaging software is cheap and ubiquitous, but a service dedicated to videoconferencing is a better choice for many businesses: they can support more participants and offer advanced features that instant messaging software lacks.

WebEx specializes in online meetings, allowing dozens or even hundreds of people to participate in your conference. Each meeting is run by a "presenter" (which can be changed during the course of a meeting) who controls the virtual floor. In addition to seeing your smiling face, meeting participants can view documents on your computer, draw on a shared whiteboard, or collaborate in any application. For occasional users, the service costs 45 cents per participant per minute. Monthly subscriptions are also available for regular users. In addition to Web conferencing, the service can support phone-in participants.



WebEx allows meeting participants to view documents on a PC, draw on a shared whiteboard, or collaborate in different applications.

For one-on-one conferences that are more professional than an instant messaging application can deliver, there's SightSpeed. The service provides 30 frames-per-second video and audio. You can try SightSpeed for free. A "silver" membership gets you 200 minutes of videoconferencing for $4.95 per month, plus 20 cents per minute for additional time. The "gold membership" provides unlimited use for $29.95 per month.

**Be Prepared**
It's a good idea to schedule a set-up time before an important meeting to make sure that your videoconferencing software talks nicely with the other participants', and to iron out any wrinkles.

Some videoconferencing software will not work properly if any of the participants are behind a firewall. You may have to create a hole in the firewall to accommodate the software: check the documentation to find out which ports need to be accessible though the firewall.

Once you are familiar with the software, taking part in an online videoconference can be as easy

as talking on the telephone, and as valuable as meeting in person.

*Kevin Savetz has been a freelance technology writer for a decade. Savetz's knowledge of small business technology has been published by The Washington Post, Computer Shopper, and The Rotarian. He maintains Kevin Savetz' Guide To Buying a Ridiculously Cheap PC.*

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